

Background Summary and Questions ...

In 1890, Louisiana passed a statute called the "Separate Car Act", which stated "that all railway companies carrying passengers in their coaches in this state, shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races, by providing two or more passenger coaches for each passenger train, or by dividing the passenger coaches by a partition so as to secure separate accommodations. . . ." The penalty for sitting in the wrong compartment was a fine of \$25 or 20 days in jail.



The Plessy case was carefully orchestrated by both the Citizens' Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Act, a group of blacks who raised \$3000 to challenge the Act, and the East Louisiana Railroad Company, which sought to terminate the Act largely for monetary reasons. They chose a 30-year-old shoemaker named Homer Plessy, a citizen of the United States who was one-eighth black and a resident of the state of Louisiana. On June 7, 1892, Plessy purchased a first-class passage from New Orleans to Covington, Louisiana and sat in the railroad car designated for whites only. The railroad officials, following through on the arrangement, arrested Plessy and charged him with violating the Separate Car Act. Well known advocate for black rights Albion Tourgee, a white lawyer, agreed to argue the case without compensation.

In the criminal district court for the parish of Orleans, Plessy argued that the Separate Car Act violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution.

Thirteenth Amendment

Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Fourteenth Amendment

Section 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

John Howard Ferguson was the judge presiding over Plessy's criminal case in the district court. He had previously declared the Separate Car Act "unconstitutional on trains that traveled through several states." However, in Plessy's case he decided that the state could choose to regulate railroad companies that

operated solely within the state of Louisiana. Therefore, Ferguson found Plessy guilty and declared the Separate Car Act constitutional.

Plessy appealed the case to the Louisiana State Supreme Court, which affirmed the decision that the Louisiana law as constitutional. Plessy petitioned for a *writ of error* from the Supreme Court of the United States. Judge John Howard Ferguson was named in the case brought before the United States Supreme Court (*Plessy v. Ferguson*) because he had been named in the petition to the Louisiana Supreme Court and not because he was a party to the initial lawsuit.

Diagram of How the Case Moved Through the Court System

Supreme Court of the United States

The Court upheld the Louisiana State Supreme Court's decision and declared that the "Separate Car Act" was constitutional as long as there were separate but equal accommodations for both whites and blacks. It further stated that the legal distinction made by the Act did not in any way destroy the legal equality of the two races.

(As to the question Plessy raised in his petition to the Louisiana State Supreme Court about his not being black, the Supreme Court of the United States recognized that it may be an important question, but the question was not properly put in issue in this case.)

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

Plessy filed a petition for *writs of error* and *certiorari* to the Supreme Court of the United States, arguing that the "Separate Car Act" violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments.

Louisiana State Supreme Court

Rejected Plessy's argument that Judge Ferguson's ruling should be overturned; the Court affirmed the constitutionality of the Separate Car Act and further stated Plessy refused to admit he was black.

Ex parte Plessy (1892)

Plessy petitioned the Louisiana Supreme Court not as an appeal of the district court decision but in a separate case on his behalf, for a *writ of prohibition* to stop Judge Ferguson from continuing the legal proceedings against him. Plessy argued that he was only one-eighth black, that the mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him, and thus that he should be afforded all the rights and privileges of a white man.

Criminal District Court for the Parish of Orleans

Judge Ferguson of state district court found Plessy guilty of not leaving the car for whites when asked to; denied claim that Separate Car Act was unconstitutional because Louisiana could regulate its railroad companies however it saw fit as long as equal accommodations were provided.

State of Louisiana v. Plessy (1892)

Name_____

Date_____

Period_____

Plessy V Ferguson Reading Homework

Knowledge Questions

What law did Homer Plessy violate?

How did Plessy violate this law?

Comprehension Questions

What rights do the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution provide?

13 th Amendment	14 th Amendment

What claim did Plessy make to the Louisiana State Supreme Court?

How did his claim reflect on his argument that his Fourteenth Amendment rights were violated?

Application Question

If you were Plessy's lawyer, how would you justify your claim that the "Separate Car Act" violates the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments?

In State of Louisiana v. Plessy, Judge Ferguson decided that the state could choose to regulate railroad companies that operated within the state even though he had previously declared the "Separate Car Act" unconstitutional on trains that traveled through several states. If an act is declared unconstitutional in one case, shouldn't it be held unconstitutional in all cases? How do you think Judge Ferguson could legally justify making this distinction?

Is it possible for two races to remain separated while striving for equality? Are separation and equality compatible? Why or why not?

Can you think of an example or situation where separation does not mean inequality?
